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Teaching the Bond Way

Issue 1:

10 ways to use eTEVALs to improve your teaching



10 ways to use eTEVALs to improve your teaching

by Dr Shelley Kinash, Director of Learning & Teaching, skinash@bond.edu.au

26 January 2015

Student Evaluation of Courses and Teaching (SECT) is the collection, analysis, reporting and application of feedback from students about the design, facilitation and quality of the student experience. The most common means of data collection is through electronic surveys distributed near the end of the teaching semester or at the conclusion of a degree.

At Bond University, this process is called eTEVAL. The full form of this abbreviation is electronic teaching evaluation. The main reason Bond University uses eTEVALs is to listen to and act upon the student voice regarding how to optimise a quality student learning experience. Through surveys, we ask students questions about their learning, engagement and overall student experience through teachers and through subjects. eTEVALs is only one way in which Bond University collects, reports and uses information for quality assurance and improvement. For example, we also use peer review of teaching and data analytics.

One of our key actions at Bond, as articulated in our Strategic Plan, is to –

Ensure the highest quality of teaching.

eTEVALs help us to gauge whether we are meeting this target. Our mean (average) scores on overview survey questions about the quality of teaching and of subjects is consistently above 4/5 across the university. Many scores are well above 4.

In order to ensure the highest quality of teaching, Bond University administers an eTEVAL system that:

- has clear, valid questions
- is electronically administered through a system that is automated, accessible, user-friendly, convenient and environmental
- has the highest documented student response rates in the country
- assures the anonymity of student respondents
- engages students as evaluators (beyond the role of survey respondents) in that students were key stakeholders in designing the eTEVAL system and the Bond University Student Association (BUSA) are actively involved in continual refinement of the system
- provides data-rich, visual reports including both quantitative analysis of Likert-scale items and qualitative thematic analysis of student comments
- closes-the-loop on feedback from students by making quantitative eTEVAL scores fully available to students (online through BUSA and in the library) and by reporting actions taken in response to student eTEVAL comments

The Bond University eTEVAL system uses a third-party software called EvaluationKit, renowned for its security, efficiency and user-friendly design. The Bond University eTEVAL system is administered through the Office of People, Planning and Strategy. The Office of Learning and Teaching actively supports Bond University teachers with responding to and actioning feedback from students in order to close-the-loop and ensure the highest quality of teaching.

Bond University – Leader in Student Evaluation Research

In December 2013, the Bond University Office of Learning and Teaching was awarded a project grant through the Australian Government, Office of Learning and Teaching. In February 2015, the final report was submitted.

Kinash, S., Judd, M-M., Naidu, V., Santhanam, E., Fleming, J., Tulloch, M., Tucker, B., & Nair, C.S. (2015). *Measuring and improving student course engagement and learning success through online student evaluation systems*, report prepared for the Office for Learning and Teaching, Australian Government. <http://highereducationstudentevaluation.com>

The aims of this project were to describe and disseminate Australian case studies of effective systems, approaches and strategies used to measure and improve student course engagement and learning success through the use of online student evaluation systems. Six institution project partners have developed innovations. This project aimed and accomplished dissemination of these and additional strategies to the sector. The six universities partnering in this learning and teaching research project were:

- Bond University (Lead)
- Australian Catholic University
- Central Queensland University
- Charles Sturt University
- Curtin University
- The University of Western Australia

The project team interviewed and conducted focus groups with a total of 97 project participants including students, academics, professional staff responsible for administering student evaluation and senior executives such as Deputy Vice-Chancellors. The project outcomes/deliverables included: a final project report; a student evaluation symposium with 75 registrants; a project evaluation report; 5 completed dissemination conference presentations and papers; a developing draft of a full Innovation and Development Project proposal; six case studies of good practice in student evaluation; and a supported website at <http://highereducationstudentevaluation.com>

The overall results and key findings were as follows:

How can we measure student engagement and learning success using student evaluation processes? Project participants explained that as a stand-alone process, student evaluation does not yield valid data to measure student engagement and learning success. However, when student evaluation data is strategically integrated with a full suite of other quality assurance tools, processes and data-bases, student survey responses are a rich and informative means of evaluating the effectiveness of higher education.

How can students contribute to on-going improvement in university learning and teaching? A salient theme across interviews and focus groups was that student evaluation surveys are part of a suite of quality assurance tools through which students can contribute to on-going improvement in university learning and teaching.

Overall sentiment towards the student evaluation process

Student project participants were neutral to positive about student evaluation (SE). Most student responses indicated an acceptance that the SE process was necessary and potentially useful, albeit for future semesters of students rather than immediate benefit for themselves. Academic project participants were accepting of the role of SE in the educational experience, acknowledging that SE is a standard process across universities. The responses of the professional staff were strongly aligned with those of the academics. The major theme of their comments was a conceptualisation of students as *evaluators* as opposed to only survey *respondents*. Professional staff said that students should be consulted, included and informed. Project participants from the senior executive stakeholder group expressed positive sentiment towards SE, stating that the system enables the student voice.

Strengths and needed improvements to the student evaluation process

Project participants perceived three main strengths of student evaluation processes at partner institutions.

- Online administration means that the systems are automated, accessible, user-friendly, convenient and environmental.

- The process results in meaningful data that allows change and improvement.
- Universities administer frequent and standard survey administration such that historic evaluation is possible.

The main need for improvement was that survey questions need refining as some are vague, confusing and/or ambiguous.

Recommendations for improving student evaluation

Numerous recommendations were expressed by various stakeholders throughout the interviews and focus groups. The recommendations are clustered by theme below.

Survey timing and accessibility

- Leave surveys open as long as possible including during exam block.
- Provide an additional digital dropbox whereby students can submit feedback as it occurs to them.
- Consider moving beyond a sole summative measure of satisfaction by asking students at the start of the semester to outline their expectations and then evaluate at end.
- Design surveys to be as user-friendly as possible, such as by designing them to feel like apps whereby the student clicks on a rating circle.

Survey design

- Use as few surveys as possible.
- Include as few questions as possible.
- Provide room for extensive free text.
- Allow the students the option of responding to some or all questions.
- Ask questions about courses and programs in addition to subjects or units.

Provide the opportunity for additional feedback

- Include a survey space for students to insert their name and contact information if they wish to provide additional verbal feedback.
- Include a survey space for students to insert their name and contact information if they wish to be contacted to talk about their own learning and/or progress.

- Insert a line in the survey stating, “If you have any problems or concerns you are also welcome to contact me [insert teacher’s name] directly and I will see what I can do.”

Engage in conversations

- Teachers are encouraged to discuss the importance of student evaluation with students.
- Do not rely on surveys as the sole source of evaluation.
- Senior executives are encouraged to visit classes periodically to ask students for their opinions on educational matters.
- Schedule focus groups.
- Engage class representatives.

Refine reports and improve reporting

- If using the mean score on Likert-scale items, also provide the median and/or mode.
- Email students a link to the overall student evaluation results.
- Present ‘this is what I am going to change for next year from your feedback.’
- At the beginning of the semester review results from prior surveys and action taken.
- Facilitate feedback sessions with student cohorts.

Provide professional development

- Teach students how to write appropriate, professional, constructive feedback.
- Provide workshops for academics on how to interpret and take appropriate action.

Provide an opportunity for academics to respond and/or rebut

- Formalise a process for academics to respond to student feedback.
- Provide an opportunity for appeal if student evaluation feedback is perceived as inaccurate and/or unfair.

Engaging with eTEVALs is an important means of ensuring the highest quality of teaching. The rest of this article is written for teachers. Here are –

10 ways to use eTEVALs to improve your teaching

1. Have conversations with your students about eTEVALs.

In the first class, and periodically throughout the semester, talk with your students about eTEVALs. Tell them what eTEVALs are and why they matter to you as a teacher. Help students identify with their role as evaluators and discuss why they should take that role seriously.

2. Teach your students how to write professional, constructive comments.

Tell your students that you read their eTEVAL comments and that these comments matter to you. Encourage them not just to fill in the dots on the survey forms; ask each of them to also write at least one comment. Remind them that their teachers will have an emotional reaction to the comments and it is therefore important for them to avoid being unduly harsh or mean. Ask them to be specific. Ask them to specifically write details about commendations and needed improvements to your teaching and/or the subject design. Encourage them to consider including a suggested strategy or improvement if they are writing about a needed improvement. Most important, ask them to write the type of comments that they would appreciate reading (and need to hear) if they were in your shoes as teacher.

3. Do not rely on eTEVALs as the only means of evaluation.

eTEVALs are only one means of education evaluation. There are limitations. An eTEVAL limitation documented in the research literature is that current students as evaluators do not have knowledge of future employment and other graduate life experiences to currently evaluate the long-term impact of teaching and subject design. Teachers should therefore embrace other opportunities for evaluation such as peer review of teaching and use of learning analytics. Consider running your own learning and teaching research projects whereby you test whether a given approach truly makes a difference to student learning. Collect evidence.

4. Also use formative evaluation.

Your current students will not be the beneficiaries of improvements you make as a result of their feedback. eTEVAL reports are distributed in O-week of the subsequent semester (this is so that, ethically, teachers do not receive feedback from students until grades have been finalised). This means that feedback informing possible improvements is not received in time to make changes for the current cohort of students. eTEVALs are therefore summative tools. They allow students the perspective of an entire semester. Formative evaluation is also useful. Formative evaluation enables ongoing development. Have you tried a new approach, such as a creative group-work process, and you want to know how your students perceived it and how to improve it for the next time? Send students a quick anonymous survey that they can return through iLearn or through <http://toofast.ca>. Remember to analyse the results and report back to your current students about the survey results and what you are going to change for the next time you use that teaching approach.

5. Embrace F-learning.

F-learning stands for failure learning. It does not mean that you as a teacher are a failure, but that not all teaching approaches work for all cohorts of students. Teachers often say that the best student learning experiences are those in which students try something new and learn from their mistakes. Likewise, in order to make an outstanding contribution to student learning, teachers need to attempt innovations. Sometimes the ideas work and sometimes they do not. Student feedback provides important information about what works, what does not and ideas of improvements to make for the next time.

6. Treat yourself with kindness and fairness.

Your job is to make an outstanding contribution to student learning. Your job is not to gain the approval and/or liking of your student cohort. If, for example, a large number of the students in the class comment that you are cold and unresponsive, you might need to re-examine your teacher presence and way in which your teaching manner is being perceived by your students. If on the other hand, a few students comment that you are too demanding because

your exams are difficult, you should interpret this feedback carefully. Not everyone is going to like you all of the time. You are asking them to do the hard work of learning. Have you supported your students in their learning and are the exams at the appropriate difficulty level as ascertained through benchmarking and industry standards?

7. Seek support, collegiality, supervision and/or professional development.

Sometimes eTEVALs are as expected. They affirm our teaching and subject design. There are a few valid points regarding changes that would improve the student learning experience. Sometimes, on the other hand, eTEVALs can be confusing, confronting and/or upsetting. Consider your follow-on needs and seek support. Sometimes you need a conversation with colleagues to talk about what was in the report and either reassure one another and/or share ideas of strategies and changes. If you receive feedback that does not align with your self-expectations and/or self-evaluation, or comments that seem unfair or mean, it can be helpful to meet with your supervisor. Ask her/him for feedback on your teaching and/or subject design. She/he might inform this feedback through directly observing your teaching, looking through your iLearn site together and considering past conversations with your students. Sometimes eTEVAL reports can indicate the need for professional development. Teaching is both an art and a science. There are many improvements to teaching that can be learned. Academics at Bond University who have sought professional development through the Office of Learning and Teaching have experienced subsequent significant increases in their eTEVAL ratings.

For teaching coaching, support and individualised professional development contact –

Dr Sarah Long slong@bond.edu.au

8. Align the eTEVAL feedback you receive with key teaching principles.

Education research has revealed that the following are the defining characteristics of good teachers. Consider what you do and who you are as a

teacher with these teaching principles and the feedback you receive via your eTEVALs. Ask yourself whether changes/improvements are warranted.

Good teaching at Bond means that:

- Students know that their teachers care about their learning. As evidence, teachers are available and responsive during regular office hours and teachers respond to student emails within two business days.
- Teachers follow subject outlines as a contract with students. Details of timetables, schedules, due-dates, assessment marking and other such student learning experiences are clearly outlined and followed.
- Classes are taught using small-class pedagogy. At Bond University, class sizes are kept small so that teachers know every student by name and know the strengths and needs of each student. Teachers go out of their way to personalise the learning experience for each student, providing extra support when it is required.
- Lesson planning focusses on what the students will be doing during class periods. This means that students spend much less time listening to lectures than they do applying the material and engaged in robust, meaningful activity to learn and develop knowledge, skills and graduate attributes.
- Teachers are experts in their discipline and keep up to date with the latest knowledge-base, research and workplace processes and approaches. Teachers share these knowledge, skills and attributes with their learners and provide an essential gateway with relevant employers/employment.
- Assessment is fair and authentic. Assessment is designed to be a key learning experience. Teachers are clear about assessment guidelines, how assessment is marked and how assessment authentically relates to graduate experiences (employability). Teachers provide regular, immediate and detailed feedback to students throughout the semester. Teachers set their students up for success.
- iLearn sites are robust sites of learning that are maintained and developed by teachers. In addition to subject outlines, teachers use iLearn sites as gateways to enhancement materials, means for students to track their progress and interactive communication tools.

9. Report back to the students who filled-out the surveys.

Students complete eTEVAL surveys near the end of a given semester. When you receive eTEVAL reports in O-week of the following semester, send an email directly to the students to whom the eTEVAL surveys were administered (i.e. the previous semester of students). Thank them for completing the surveys. Assure them that you read and considered their feedback. Report the mean scores on all Likert-scale questions and summarise the themes of their comments. Tell them what you will continue to do and what you will change/improve as a direct result of their feedback. Affirm that they have made a difference for the upcoming semester. Encourage them to fill-out the eTEVAL semesters in the current semester.

10. Participate in university-wide initiatives to report eTEVAL actions/improvements back to students.

Through your Faculty, the Office of Learning and Teaching and the Office of People, Planning and Strategy, you will be supported to report actions/improvements informed by eTEVALs back to Bond students. Bond University actively supports the reporting of summarised student feedback, resulting actions/improvements and implementation dates. These reports are made available to students through iLearn sites and links from subject outlines. Seek out and positively contribute to these closing-the-loop initiatives.